

Technology: The Overstated Route to Happiness

By Socrates

In my search for wisdom I meet many people. As I converse with them I find that they all seek the same thing: happiness. But when I ask how they intend to achieve their goal of happiness, their answers reveal how elusive it is.

I was recently at a technology market. As I wandered through the exhibit tents, I was struck with what everyone seemed to be selling: happiness. Astonishingly this elusive thing seemed to be available for purchase at a technology market. Now I must be clear, the advertising didn't use the term "happiness". However this is clearly what they wanted people to think. I saw displays of people smiling and looking fulfilled, all thanks to their technological aids; iPads, robotic lawnmowers, automated vacuum cleaners, and software to remote control their house.

Walking towards the section on autonomous cars, I ran into my 21st century friend, Paul.

PAUL: Ah, Socrates, what brings you to the technology market? Are you finally going to upgrade your home?

SOCRATES: It is good to see you, my friend. I have arrived here either by accident or by the will of the gods. Which one, I am not certain. But here I am looking at the many things I do not need.

PAUL: Now then, Socrates, the gods may have sent you to purchase a robotic lawnmower. Your lawns are over grown and this surely must disturb you.

SOCRATES: Why should that disturb me?

PAUL: Because your garden is an unsightly mess. You'd be much happier with a tidy house.

SOCRATES: I do not know that this is true, but as you are keenly aware, I am on a search for happiness. Do you believe I can reach my goal by purchasing a lawnmower?

PAUL: Among other things. You would also find a dishwasher useful.

SOCRATES: I have a dishwasher.

PAUL: No you don't Socrates. Remember, I have visited you often and have never seen a dishwasher.

SOCRATES: My dishwasher is me. I wash dishes at my house.

PAUL: Ah yes, but that is a miserable job. Wouldn't you be happier if you could have a machine take care of the task for you?

SOCRATES: I do not know the answer to that question. Can you please explain why that would make me happier?

PAUL: I am pleased to help the wise Socrates learn how to improve his happiness.

SOCRATES: Remember, Paul, I am not wise. I love wisdom and that is why I seek it out. But I have none myself. That is why I seek out wise people — so that I may learn from them. You claim to have wisdom in using technology to bring happiness, so please instruct me.

PAUL: Okay, consider the reason why people are unhappy. It is because the world isn't the way they want it to be, right? Whenever I have unwashed dishes or uncut grass, my home doesn't look as nice as I want it. So I become unhappy and feel the need to change things.

SOCRATES: It sounds like you are suggesting that the reason people are unhappy is because the world isn't the way they want it to be.

PAUL: That is correct.

SOCRATES: And you believe that to become happy, people need to change the world so that it suits their desires.

PAUL: Again, correct.

SOCRATES: May I restate this premise in a clearer form:

P1. Because the reason for my unhappiness is that the world does not conform to my desires, if I want to be happy, I need to adjust the world to suit my desires

Does this wording capture your claim?

PAUL: I couldn't have put it better myself.

SOCRATES: Perhaps, but you may one day decide to re-work your premise completely. Now, it is obvious to me that your argument also includes the premise that people want to be happy.

PAUL: Of course.

SOCRATES: And based on your two premises, you validly conclude that people need to adjust the world to suit their desires. And it is for this reason that you believe we need technology such as dishwashers and lawnmowers, am I right?

PAUL: You are quite correct, Socrates. Dishwashers and lawnmowers are needed to make the world better and thus make our lives happier.

SOCRATES: Let's summarize our argument in syllogistic form:

P1. Because the reason for my unhappiness is that the world does not conform to my desires, if I want to be happy, I need to adjust the world to suit my desires

P2. I want to be happy

C1. Therefore, I need to adjust the world to suit my desires

P3. Technology is the means by which I adjust the world to suit my desires in order to achieve happiness

C2. Therefore, technology brings happiness

Does this sound correct to you?

PAUL: Again, Socrates, you have presented my case with clarity.

SOCRATES: I am afraid, my friend, that based on this argument you are in a most unfortunate position.

PAUL: Why do you say that?

SOCRATES: Are you not arguing that in order to be happy you need to adjust the world to suit your desires?

PAUL: That is what I have said.

SOCRATES: Then to achieve happiness you must change objective reality. Now the world is imperfect, is it not?

PAUL: Yes, the world is imperfect. That is precisely my point.

SOCRATES: Do you think you can use technology to make the world perfect?

PAUL: Well, not perfect, but technology can make it better.

SOCRATES: Not perfect, of course. We are in agreement then. Achieving perfection is a task suited only to the gods. But you said you can make it better. How do you do that?

PAUL: By cutting the grass, by using a dishwasher to clean my dishes, by vacuuming my house.

SOCRATES: So you make it better by altering small aspects of the world. But since you agree that the world is not perfect, do you not also agree that for each element you adjust, there will be other elements that you rate poorly?

PAUL: It is true that I can't fix everything. There will always be something else to change.

SOCRATES: And is it not the case that different people have different ideas of how the world should be?

PAUL: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Some people like long grass. Other people like short grass.

PAUL: That may well be true.

SOCRATES: So if you like short grass, you will be in conflict with someone who likes long grass. You will both be trying to bend reality to suit your desires. Do you think happiness can be achieved in this way?

PAUL: I might improve my happiness in the short term.

SOCRATES: This is unfortunate, my friend. Technological fixes don't last. Things break because nature is unpredictable. And because other people have differing ideas of how the world should be, the most you'll achieve with technology is temporary happiness. There will always be something else to fix. Do you prefer lasting happiness or temporary happiness?

PAUL: Only a fool would prefer temporary happiness over lasting happiness.

SOCRATES: You speak with wisdom my friend. Perhaps we should take a closer look at your first premise:

P1. Because the reason for my unhappiness is that the world does not conform to my desires, if I want to be happy, I need to adjust the world to suit my desires

You believe that the reason people are unhappy is that the world does not conform to their desires. May I ask, is the world the sort of place that should conform to people's desires?

PAUL: It often doesn't. But we can change it. That's why we developed technology.

SOCRATES: Indeed this is true. But technology was developed with the assumption that the world needs to change to make us happy. Is there another way to look at things?

PAUL: I don't know, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You have an expectation that the world should be a certain way, and if it can be adjusted appropriately you will be happy. Is that correct?

PAUL: Yes, that is what we have established.

SOCRATES: Let's assume that you have no power to change the world. What do you have power over?

PAUL: I am not sure what you are asking.

SOCRATES: Do you make free decisions?

PAUL: I suppose so.

SOCRATES: So is it not true that you have power over your own decisions?

PAUL: That follows.

SOCRATES: If you decide that the world needs to change to make you happy, is it not possible for you to decide otherwise?

PAUL: I could indeed decide that the world shouldn't be changed, but I fear that I would then not be happy.

SOCRATES: From where do you get the expectation that the world must be a certain way for you to be happy?

PAUL: I don't know. I just want things to be a certain way.

SOCRATES: Look around you. What do you see?

PAUL: Advertising.

SOCRATES: Lots of advertising. And what is this advertising telling you?

PAUL: That I need certain products to make my life better.

SOCRATES: By Hercules, what an astute observation. You have said that you have the power to make free decisions, so you can choose whether or not to believe what this advertising is telling you, is that not true?

PAUL: Yes, I am free to believe whatever I want.

SOCRATES: Are you not also free to decide for yourself what you need in order to achieve happiness?

PAUL: That follows from what has been said.

SOCRATES: Then is it not true that you can decide to be happy with the world the way it is? This would seem to be a more certain road to happiness than the expectation that the world conform to your desires.

PAUL: I agree with your logic Socrates, but I think that will be difficult.

SOCRATES: More difficult than the relentless task of altering objective reality?

PAUL: Perhaps not.

SOCRATES: It seems to me that happiness can be achieved by conforming the soul to objective reality rather than attempting to change reality to suit the soul. This is what we ancients believed.

PAUL: You have given me something interesting to think about, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I think we have given each other something interesting to think about my dear friend.